

Inside the Rescue MISSION STAT

By DAVID C. MARTIN, Pentagon Correspondent

For days he loitered outside the U.S. Embassy in Teheran, gazing at the compound walls, the chained gates, the sleeping guards. Sometimes he drove far into the desert, then returned to pound the pavements of Teheran on foot. According to the Arya Sheraton Hotel registry, he was Richard H. Keith, a ruggedly handsome Irish citizen working for a European auto company. In fact, he was Richard J. Meadows, 47, a highly decorated, retired Green Beret whose task was to case the embassy wall for penetration points, to search for booby traps and to serve as point man for the climax of Operation Rice Bowl—the dramatic but doomed attempt to rescue 53 American hostages.

Meadows, code name "Esquire," was one of at least seven American operatives who slipped into Teheran before the rescue attempt ended in flames at a remote rendezvous called Desert One—leaving the undercover agents with their cover stories in tatters and their lives at stake. Meadows has refused to talk about his secret mission to Teheran, but after hours of interviews with other participants in the rescue effort—including Col. Charles ("Chargin' Charlie") Beckwith, the ground-force commander—NEWSWEEK has pieced together the most detailed account yet disclosed of the preparations to free the hostages in Teheran. Among the findings:

- The rescue team was ready to leave for Teheran without a clear picture of just where the captive Americans were being held within the embassy compound. It was only four hours before the commandos left Egypt for Iran that they learned—by pure chance—where the hostages were held in the chancellery building (photo, page 18).
- Two days before the rescue attempt, U.S. operatives in Teheran began to fear that one of their key hide-outs had been uncovered by Iranian officials. A reference to the hide-out in documents later abandoned at Desert One could well have tipped Iranian officials to the real identity of Meadows and the other undercover agents.
- Despite President Jimmy Carter's desire that casualties be kept to a minimum, the raiders themselves expected considerable bloodshed—with an Iranian death toll mounting into the "hundreds" even if the operation went smoothly according to plan.
- The most crucial step of the rescue effort—a helicopter landing inside Teheran—was never adequately rehearsed, and to this day the commandos hold a grudge against the Marine helicopter pilots. Beckwith later told friends that he nearly drew his pistol on the commander of the pilots, whom he denounced as "cowards."

The aborted rescue mission left eight men dead and raised a host of controversial questions about the planning, preparation and execution involved. An extensive Pentagon investigation was subsequently conducted, but both Beckwith and point man Meadows believe that at least some aspects of the mission should be scrutinized again. Retired Adm. Stansfield Turner, CIA director at the time of the rescue effort, has already called for new top-level inquiries with an eye to future crises.

Both Beckwith and Meadows were involved with the rescue effort from its first day—Nov. 4, 1979—when the U.S. Embassy in Teheran was taken over by Iranian militants.



↑ 'Chargin' Charlie' Beckwith and Meadows



CONTINUED